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SUBJECT: ISRAEL'S ELECTIONS AT THE HOME STRETCH: KADIMA
REMAINS IN THE LEAD

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The March 28 Israeli election will cement the long-predicted victory of the new, centrist Kadima party by a dominant plurality of the votes, with its sparring partners, Labor and Likud, most likely coming in distant second and third places, respectively. Neither Labor nor Likud can expect a major, election-day surge in support, despite unusually high numbers of supposedly undecided voters and Amir Peretz's tireless campaigning, but Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party could continue its steady rise in popularity among right-leaning, Russian-speaking voters to compete with Likud and Labor in the standings. The relative results on the right will determine what options Kadima has for a coalition that can co-opt the right and the ultra-Orthodox without allowing leaders of those groups to hold Olmert's "convergence" plan hostage to their do-nothing-to-reward-Hamas mantras. Kadima also has as an option a more costly (in terms of government positions or "price" in budget deals), but perhaps more workable coalition partnership with Labor-Meimad on the left. End Summary.

CHALLENGE TO GET OUT THE VOTE

¶12. (C) The main challenge facing Kadima and other major parties, notably Labor and Likud, remains voter apathy. Most of Israel's liberal pundits bemoan the reported indifference of the Israeli electorate, particularly at the center and on the left. This trend is not new. Voter participation reached its nadir in 2003, but voter apathy in that election was primarily on the left, allowing Sharon's right-leaning Likud party to secure a dominant 38 seats in the Knesset. (Note: This apathy, by Israeli standards, meant a record low turnout of some 68 percent.) Kadima, Labor and Likud activists, from their respective party leaders on down, agree that low voter turnout could hurt Israel's three mainstream parties more than it will hurt parties on the extremes, particularly the right. Thanks to Israel's proportional representation electoral system, a really poor turnout -- low sixties in Israeli terms -- would automatically benefit extremist parties with small but committed memberships: on the right, such as the National Union/National Religious Party; the ultra-Orthodox, such as Shas and Torah and Shabbat Judaism (formerly United Torah Judaism); and to a lesser extent the single issue parties on the leftist fringe, such as the Green Leaf Party (marijuana legalization) or the Pensioner's party.

ELECTIONS AS A REFERENDUM ON THE WAY AHEAD

¶13. (C) What will galvanize the indifferent or apathetic voter? Olmert has framed the election as a referendum on Kadima's "convergence plan" of unilateral actions to define Israel's borders in a way that will incorporate major settlement blocs and require withdrawals from other parts of the West Bank. Kadima organizers hope that Olmert's actions as acting prime minister will demonstrate that he is a man of action, not just words. Evacuating the Amona outpost signaled his intention to put law-breaking Israeli settlers on notice, while his decision to lay siege to the Jericho prison and apprehend the Palestinian suspects involved in the assassination of one of the settlers' heroes marked an opportunity to prove he is no dove when it comes to responding to terrorism. To govern effectively, Olmert needs to avoid the type of rebel-filled coalitions that marked Sharon's successive governments. Kadima campaign organizers say Olmert needs Kadima to win a minimum of 35 seats for him to control a governing coalition; more than 40 seats will ensure that Kadima needs only one or two political partners to govern, a position that will allow Kadima to outmuscle those who try to put the brakes on implementation of the convergence plan.

ULTRA-ORTHODOX AMBIVALENCE ON "CONVERGENCE"

¶14. (C) Olmert's decision to lay out the general contours of his plan ahead of the March 28 vote has forced political leaders on the right, including potential coalition partners, to react. Some of the ultra-Orthodox may defer to their

rabbis for political guidance on whether to join Kadima's coalition post-election. That is the case for the mostly Azkhenazi "Torah and Shabbat Judaism Party," which, some Kadima strategists say they want to include in their ideal coalition. Less malleable Shas leader Eli Yishai, whose party could capture as many as 10 Knesset seats, has announced that he opposes Olmert's plan -- but Shas history demonstrates that the party will not fall on an ideological sword in the short run, particularly with the prospect of a payoff during the budget wheeling and dealing that will begin almost immediately once the 17th Knesset convenes.

LIEBERMAN ON THE RISE, PARTICULARLY AMONG THE "RUSSIANS"

15. (C) The only surprise of this election campaign is the rise of Avigdor Lieberman from the fringe to a position as a potential powerbroker on the Israeli right. He will capture a plurality of the Russian immigrant vote, which is the most significant voting minority. Lieberman is busy castigating Olmert's plan, but playing coy on a possible coalition with Kadima. This is understandable -- he wants to rob Kadima and Likud of as many "Russian" votes as he can to maximize Yisrael Beiteinu's standing before yielding to Olmert's possible entreaties after the election. Olmert has responded to Lieberman's cockiness with a strong statement that any coalition partner must support the Kadima plan, alerting Russian voters that their man, Lieberman, is not assured of a role in a Kadima-led government if Avigdor continues to criticize Olmert's plans for further unilateral actions. Kadima party organizers are, in turn, deploying their Russian media star and low-ranking Kadima candidate, Anastasia Michaeli, to wow Russian-speaking voters who have second thoughts about Lieberman.

THE HOME STRETCH

16. (C) Dov Weissglas shared with the Ambassador Kadima's current internal polling results, which predict roughly 35-40 seats for Olmert and his party. Contrary to press reports, there were no signs of panic at Kadima headquarters only days before elections, just preparations to put its efficient campaign machinery to work on a round-the-clock basis. The Kadima events organizer, Yaron Sharaby, told poloff that a blitz of focused telephone calls to those who have shown an interest in the party will be made this weekend, and events to rally support will be put into motion.

17. (C) At a recent Kadima party rally in Israel's suburban heartland of Nes Ziona, Kadima's campaign cheerleader, Minister Meir Sheetrit, urged prospective Kadima supporters to go to local Kadima offices and help engage Israeli voters. In her effort to energize centrist voters, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, whom Olmert has now indicated will be deputy prime minister, told Kadima supporters that the Likud policy of "No, No, No" represented a recipe for inaction. In the "capital" city of the Israeli south, Beersheva, the local Kadima campaign chairman told poloff that party organizers have already enlisted 1,500 volunteers to help "get out the vote" on election day. In a tour of local Kadima headquarters, he demonstrated a well-organized and motivated staff and described plans to call almost all of the city's approximately 160,000 registered voters. On the Labor campaign trail, Amir Peretz, has toured the northern and southern hinterland in a final effort to drum up support for his party. But Kadima observers note a subtle change in the tone of his message, which suggests, to some in Kadima at least, that he is preparing the Labor faithful for possible compromises that will be necessary should Labor join a Kadima-led coalition.

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